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AUTHOR Stimac, Michele
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ABSTRACT

In an age when decision making is becoming more and more significant for us human beings as we face dilemmas about whether or not to clone, to engineer behavior on mass scale, to expand or to decrease nuclear power, we educators must assist students to increase their decision-making skills. Many of our students will soon be decision makers for humankind. While we often teach decision-making skills didactically, we do not spend enough time getting students to examine how they are making decisions personally. This paper describes a model for evaluating decision passages. The model has three phases: (1) introduction to and understanding of the concept of decision passages; (2) developing a log of one's decision passages; and (3) evaluating decision-making patterns evident in decision passages. Each phase of the model is presented with examples and illustrations. The model is appropriate for use in several settings: teaching and/or counseling in group setting or in a one-on-one situation. It is an assessment model built on the premise that assessment is a first step to changing behavior. (Author)

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# "A MODEL FOR EVALUATION OF DECISION PASSAGES"

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by

Michele Stimac, Ed.D.
Associate Professor and
Doctoral Program Counselor
Pepperdine University
Los Angeles, CA

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A Model for Evaluation

of Decision Passages

We have some very important decisions facing us in the near future, decisions that will have profound ramifications for us as human beings. The "we" I speak of is the human race. However, if we want to localize that "we" and make it more specific so that it becomes more relevant to you and me, let's say the "we" is the immediate generation of students we are teaching and counseling. They will be faced with tremendously significant decisions that your and my generation has already generated. They will have to decide on such issues as: Do we want to duplicate human beings now that we have the key to the DNA molecule? Do we want to engineer behavior and control society as a whole?

I suggest that decisions such as these will be imminent, if they are not already imminent, for the individuals in our classrooms. (Remember, we do not have only youngsters in our classrooms.) I also suggest that unless we do more in the way of teaching individuals how to engage in effective personal decision-making processes or counsel them about their past and

current decision-making patterns, we will find ourselves in a society led and governed by a group of less than effective decision makers. When the power of governance rests in the hands of those we are currently teaching and counseling, they will not be ready to problem solve to a suffiently sophisticated degree required by the global tasks that confront them.

There is a current thrust in our society, evidenced by a proliferation of self-help books, to teach persons how to manage their own lives better so that they will enjoy life more and become more productive. There is also a belief that if individuals manage their own lives well, they will do a better job managing organizations and systems. If the current generation of students will soon be in a position to manage systems in our society, we ought to concern ourselves with teaching them how to manage themselves better. Personal decision-making patterns undoubtedly affect the patterns in decision-making processes concerning systems issues.

While there is no question that decision making is essential to each of us, whether it be decision making in our personal lives or decision making in our professional roles, it is my contention that we educators too often, if we attempt to teach decision making at all, do so almost exclusively in a didactic fashion. We present models for decision making. We lecture on the theories of decision making. We demonstrate step-by-step processes of what we consider effective problem-solving or decision-making techniques. We write books on effective decision making. We do not, however, spend enough time getting students to evaluate how they have made or are making decisions in their own lives. Their grasp of effective

decision making, therefore, often remains only theoretical, not practical. While it is important for them to continue to be exposed to theories of decision making, it is also essential for them to examine whether or not they are applying these theories in their own lives.

Some years ago I began to implement a method of getting students to look closely at their decision-making patterns. My approach was to have them examine their past and current behavior and assess how they manage the dynamics that occur as they proceed through decision-making passages in their lives. Each time I used the approach, I found student reponse decidedly positive while my own appreciation for the approach increased. As the approach became more and more refined each time I used it, I eventually determined that it was indeed a viable model for assessing decision-making patterns that should be shared with teachers and counselors. The Personal and Guidance Journal, November, 1977, carried an article I wrote describing the model in detail. I refer to it as "A Model for Evaluating Decision Passages: A Facet of Self Assessment."

I currently use the model in a Management of Human Endeavor course at the doctoral level. I use it in Career Development context in group setting and in counseling on a one-on-one basis. The model proves effective in several settings. It can be used by teachers and counselors and others in helping professions.

It is essential to keep in mind that the model is an assessment model. It does not assist teachers/counselors to teach decision-making processess directly or didactically. It develops rather a process for teachers/

counselors to use in getting students to evaluate how they are decision making and how they have decision mad in the past. It is a discovery approach through assessment. Assessment, I believe, is a first step to modifying behavior.

The model consists of three phases:

I. Introduction to and understanding of the concept of decision passages;

II. Developing a log of one's decision passages; and

III. Evaluating decision-making patterns evident in decision passages.

Let me describe these phases briefly.

I. Introduction to and understanding of the concept of decision passages.

I use a piece of literature to introduce the notion of decision passages. My favorite piece for this purpose is Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken."

I read the poem aloud once or twice pausing after each reading so that students may reflect on its meaning and on the feelings and perceptions of the speaker in the poem who is confronted with the dilemma of which "road" to choose.

Students quickly grasp the notion that individuals pass through an intrapsychic conflict phase in their lives when they are confronted with a decision. In this conflict phase, individuals who problem solve intelligently deliberate on and assess alternatives, they reflect on

consequences of their choices, they conjure up more alternatives, and they cope with the dynamics that enter their lives as they go through the process of deciding which alternative to choose.

Many significant points about intrapsychic conflict passages in lives of individuals become evident in Frost's poem: 1) the ambivalence that often envelopes persons as they stand in the face of making a choice between alternatives; 2) the aloneness persons feel as they contemplate the responsibility of choices and the anxiety that comes from reflecting on the ramifications of choices; 3) the sadness persons experience at not being able to "have it both ways, " of being in the perplexing existential position of having to discriminate, of not being able to "have cake and eat it too"; 4) the existential fact of not being able to return to alternatives later when they are once rejected, as least not in the same way as they appear at the time they are rejected; 5) how choosing autonomously often means standing apart and alone and often as different from others; 6) how making decisions means taking risks and how risk taking can provoke anxiety; 7) how contentment often comes when one has made a good decision; 8) how even with contentment one always wonders what the other alternative might have brought.

After a thorough discussion of Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," I recapitualte that a decision passage is that period of time during which a person goes through a decision-making experience. The passage may last for a short time, say a day, or a long time, say six years. The decision passage is entered at the moment a person perceives that he/she must set

about the process of making a decision about some matter in his or her life. It is exited at the moment he/she makes the decision. Dynamics enter decision passages; sometimes many dynamics occur, sometimes few. Some dynamics complicate the process of decision making severely, others affect the process only slightly. An example of a dynamic is what happens when a parent, let's say a father, imposes his restrictions on a son who is in the throes of deciding to get married. The father threatens to disown the son if he marries his Catholic girlfriend. If the son respects his father's opinion, this dynamic in the son's decision passage can magnify the intrapsychic conflict and severely complicate the process of resolution. What the son does, of course, with this dynamic says a great deal about his management process in decision making.

When students are clear about the definition of and have an understanding of what a decision passage is, I move to the second phase of the model.

II. Developing a log of one's decision passages.

I suggest at this point that students write a detailed description of decision passages in their own lives. Of course, they should write about the most significant ones. They may, if they wish, include less significant ones. There should be a sufficient number of passages logged to adequately represent the kinds of decision experiences individuals have had. Students are encouraged to describe as many of the dynamics that entered their

passages as they can remember, to recall their feelings about them and how they managed these dynamics. When students are currently going through decision passages, I encourage them to include a description of those passages also.

I make clear that during the logging phase, students should not attempt to evaluate their decision-making techniques or processes, but only describe the passages. Evaluation will come later.

I allow students sufficient time to log their decision passages so that they can do so without haste, without pressure and tension. The logging process may extend to from two to four weeks, depending on the situation.

Since the model relies heavily on students' memories of how their passages were, the process is naturally a subjective one. Subjective exercises are always susceptible to unreliability; however, if a teacher/counselor subscribes to the perceptualist/phenomenological viewpoint in psychology, he/she gives credence to subjective perception of reality. In the last analysis, what counts for each individual is not how others see reality, but how he or she sees it.

When they are finished with the logging process, students are asked to form triads or quadrads and share with each other what they have logged. Of course, they are always given the option "to pass" if for some reason they do not wish to talk about their decision passages. It is interesting, however, that only once in my experience did a person want "to pass." She

was a woman who was currently going through a painful decision passage. She was afraid that if she talked at all, she would have to talk about that particular experience and she was "just not ready to talk about it." A person should never be compelled to self-disclose. My experience, however, with this opportunity to share decision passages is that students engage in it eagerly. In fact, if for some reason I fail to allow sufficient time for it, they express resentment. My observation is that if individuals go through the process of carefully writing down the story of their major decisions, they naturally then want to talk about the process with other individuals they trust. I try to allow an hour for discussion of decision passages. I encourage free-flow non-structured discussion that allows for spontaneity and a reduction of inhibition.

III. Evaluation of decision passages.

Students who have thoroughly logged their passages and who have had sufficient time to share their passages with others are then ready for the next phase of the model: evaluation.

An evaluation of their decision passages needs preparation. I provide this preparation by means of a lecturette/discussion on certain ingredients which I suggest students examine in their decision passages. I present seven ingredients and encourage students to suggest others:

1. Definition
2. Alternative & assessment
3. Autonomy

4. Responsibility
5. Risk-taking
6. Time/timing
7. Values

Let me say something about each ingredient:

1. Definition.

I suggest to students that if they do not define the problem they are trying to solve (decision making is nothing more than resolving a problem which presents intrapsychic conflict until the problem is solved or the decision made), they often go off on a tangent, solving a different problem from the one truly besetting them. I remember so vividly when a woman spoke up with vigor once after nodding with consent all during my presentation. She supported the motion of "definition" by saying forcefully, "I know what you mean. If I had defined what I had to make a decision about when I graduated from high school, I would not foolishly have just started looking for a man." Instead of defining the decision as: What do I do next with my life?, she quickly began to implement action that led to making the decision of: Who will I marry? At thirty-five years of age, she found herself getting a divorce because she needed more than an unhappy marriage. She felt now with hindsight that she should have allowed herself the option of a career or travel instead of rushing "to find a man." This had not happened because she had failed to define the problem.

2. Alternatives and assessment.

If we clearly define the decision that besets us, I tell students, then

we are ready to accomplish the task of unearthing alternatives to resolve the problem. I suggest that students examine whether or not their passages reveal this very important task. Unearthing just the right number of alternatives is important, not so many that our mind resembles an overloaded circuit, yet not so few that we shortchange ourselves in viable options. Of course, unearthing alternatives requires a corollary process; namely, assessing these alternatives. We must study the pros and cons of each before we choose. See if this is evident in your passages, I say to students.

3. Autonomy.

Autonomy is not the simplest ingredient to discuss. Perhaps it's easier to descry. Autonomy means, the ability to stand alone and apart in making decisions, to stand on our own two feet and make decisions for ourselves based on, of course, sound criteria and judgment.

While autonomy is important on the one hand, it is important, on the other, that autonomy be qualified with the phrase "with a healthy sense of interdependence." Teenagers, for instance, in an effort to demonstrate autonomy--an ability to make a decision alone--sometimes do not seek wise counsel on important matters. They often find themselves, as a result, deeply hurt or "in hot water," or dissapointed in failure which they could have avoided had they sought out the wisdom of those with greater experience. Autonomy does not mean never soliciting another's advice just as it does not mean always doing only what others suggest even when it counters what our own better judgement suggests. Looking for indications of autonomy in decisions passages can reveal many truths about how independent or dependent or interdependent we are. The last, of course, is the most desirable.

4. Responsibility.

Responsibility is related to autonomy. If we have an ability to stand on our own two feet in making decisions, we probably can also assume responibility for the consequences of our decisions, but not necessarily. For this reason it is important to distinguish the ingredient of responsibility.

Individuals often cannot make decisions because they cannot face what might follow. As a result they often wait for others to make decisions for them or they procrastinate long enough for decisions "to go away." If they wait long enough an alternative(s) may disappear and then the burden of deciding and facing consequences is taken away from them. Living in a dissatisfied state of mind from not having the alternatives and not making the decision is more desirable, they think, than living with the burden of consequences. In the long run, however, persons with an inability to face consequences often develop a shrinking sense of self-worth.

5. Risk-taking.

Risk-taking is related to autonomy and responsibility. The overlap is obvious. We do not possess autonomy or responsibility without a certain amount of risk-taking.

Risk taking however, is a sensitive ingredient because it is difficult to calibrate. Just how much risk a person should take is a personal and idiosyncratic matter. Risks for me may not be risks for you. Individuals must determine for themselves exactly how much risk taking is viable for them in order to avoid failure and at the same time place their level of aspirations sufficiently high to succeed at capacity level.

I suggest that students, as they examine their decision passages for evidence of productive risk-taking, ask themselves questions such as: Does it appear repeatedly that if I has risked more, I would have grown more, gotten more, achieved more, been more successful in attaining my goal in life? If persons examine their decision passages and hold a pattern of regrets about not having "done enough or "gone far enough" or "reached high enough," they probably lack risk-taking ability. There is evidence of lack of risk taking if they can draw such conclusions as: If I had taken a risk and bought that real estate, for example, when I had the opportunity, I would have doubled my money. If I had risked getting hurt, I would have at least tried to establish a relationship with Sue, whose memory will forever haunt me. It is important to remember that failing to have taken a risk in one or two situations is not necessarily a basis for concluding that an individual lacks risk-taking ability. Only if patterns of lack of risk-lacking behavior are evident in several decision passages can persons draw such conclusions.

There is another side to risk-taking and that is discovering too much risk-taking in a person's passages. I suggest that students examine their passages for the opposite of lack of risk-taking ability; namely, impulsivity or taking too much risk. It is just the right amount of risk-taking that they should employ.

6. Time/timing.

In making decisions, individuals must consider time and timing as important. I tell students that if they don't "time a decision well," it

can be as bad as not making a decision at all, perhaps even worse. If, for example, I decide it is time for me to ask for promotion and I collect all the supportive data I need and "psyche myself up" for going in to see my boss about the matter; and then I discover that on the day I am ready to present my case to the boss that she is very busy or in a bad mood, I defeat my purpose by pursuing the matter at that time. Though I may be ready, she is not, and I must wait for the time when both of us are ready.

Time is important in making decisions in another sense. I suggest that students examine their passages to see how well they used time. Do they procrastinate, do they act impulsively before enough alternatives are unearthed, do they in general manage their time poorly and as a result make less timely decisions?

7. Values.

If students are not yet convinced that values influence their choices, I suggest that they study why they choose what they choose in their passages. They ought to search through each decision and isolate the values at the bottom of each. I suggest, too, that they should own these values, or change them if they do not like them. If, for example, individuals discover that many of their decisions were made because money is important to them, they should recognize that fact. If they do not like valuing money, then they should change that value. Some individuals deny values because they are not pleased with them but such denial only complicates future decisions.

A lecturette on these seven ingredients can be concluded in about a half hour. Interspersing discussion as the lecturette proceeds may lengthen

it but at the same time enrich it immensely. My experience is that students are eager to offer their views and their opinions and these provide moments of significant learning.

Students are then ready for the next significant step in the model. I ask them to reflect on their passages and evaluate them in the light of the seven ingredients presented in the lecturette and discussion. I often give them a series of questions that reinforce being aware of these ingredients as well as others, and I urge them to reflect on the questions as a later time. I request that after they reflect on answers to the questions, they put the questions aside and write a three or four page essay-type evaluation of their decision-making processes in their passages.

Let me share with you the list of questions I give as a hand-out to students which they are to use for purposes of reflection.

1. Do you make decisions with ease or with difficulty?

2. Do you deliberate a long time, short time, or, to your mind, just the right amount of time? Do you procrastinate?

3. Do you feel decision remorse immediately after a decision, much later, or not at all? Do you avoid decisions because of an inability to face consequences?

4. Do you find yourself heavily influenced by others in making decisions?

5. If your answer to No. 4 is yes, who are these others: significant others, acquaintances, "society around you," "society at large"?

6. Do you find yourself influenced by forces other than people? What are they?

7. Do you define precisely what you must decide upon when you are confronted with a decision, or do you allow it to take hazy, nebulous form so that you are not even really sure what decision besets you?

8. Do you attempt to study and explore as many alternatives as possible or do you settle for an either/or decision?

9. How would you assess your risk-taking ability?

10. Do you live in a state of abulia most of the time or do you make decisions readily and forcefully as they arise?

11. On a scale from 1 to 5, where to you rate yourself in decision-making ability? First is quality of decision-making? Second in quantity of decision-making (have you made a great many decisions in your life)?

12. What are the values that repeatedly influence your decisions?

13. As you look at your past decision passages, do you feel you have grown in quality of decision making? Why?

14. Have you personally felt "free" in making decisions or do you feel you have been a victim of your environment?

15. In what ways do you wish to change your decision-making process?

16. Do you think there is anything that stands in the way of your plans to change that process?

17. Do you think your decision-making has been very much like that of others or highly idiosyncratic?

18. Do you feel you are in control of your life?

As I suggested earlier, this set of questions is intended to serve as a refection generator prior to students' writing their evaluation. The written evaluation can be assigned over a one or two week period. Students should again be given sufficient time to evaluate the passages thoroughly.

When students return with evaluations completed, I often provide for them another small group opportunity to share with their peers their findings. This final discussion can often reflect tremendous insights which individuals have gotten about their decision-making processes. These insights often suggest changing behavior, which in turn, sometimes requires counsel and assistance from others. Insights can also in other instances confirm for

certain individuals that their decision-making patterns are effective and that they should not be changed. Self-worth in either case can be enchanced, and assessment of decision passages has, as a result, performed a positive function and increased knowledge of decision-making skills.